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Review of "Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility"

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Abstract

Mobility is a fact of contemporary life. Whether voluntary or forced, experiences of relocation are shaping the lives of millions and, increasingly, literature is turning to matters of transcultural and translingual identity that follow such relocations.

Keywords

global, age, mobility", review, "transcultural, novels, writers

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REVIEWS

DAGNINO, ARIANNA. *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2015. x + 240 pp. \$45.00.

Mobility is a fact of contemporary life. Whether voluntary or forced, experiences of relocation are shaping the lives of millions and, increasingly, literature is turning to matters of transcultural and translingual identity that follow such relocations. In *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*, Arianna Dagnino asks: “Who are contemporary transcultural writers and how do they differentiate themselves from other kinds of writers?” (3). Dagnino’s study contributes to theoretical work that has developed the concept of transculturation, a term originating in the writings of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, adapted in the 1980s by Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama, and expanded upon more recently by European scholars including Mikhail Epstein and Wolfgang Iser. The book is structured in two parts. The first is a series of creative nonfiction accounts of interviews with five transcultural writers. The second is a critical exegesis in which the author surveys the theoretical field of transcultural writing in a form of “distant reading” (18), after Franco Moretti, and draws out a set of key traits of transcultural novels. By “distant reading,” Dagnino does not mean statistical analysis of a large body of texts, but rather the analysis of “aggregated data” from others’ studies (18), with “data” referring to the qualitative findings of Epstein and others. Although Dagnino claims that this approach does not substitute for close reading, the weight of theory and the limited references to fictional texts in the second half of the book left this reader wishing for more of the creative insights that characterize the interview accounts of the first section.

Transcultural writers are those “who do not belong in one place or one culture—and usually not even one language—and who write between cultures and are interested in the complex dynamics of cultural encounters and negotiations” (14). In selecting the authors for her study, Dagnino had three criteria: the subjects’ variegated cultural identities; their lived transcultural experiences across a number of countries; and, for each, a creative transcultural literary work or body of work (10–11). Her interviewees include Inez Baranay (Australian and Hungarian), Brian Castro (Chinese, Portuguese, Australian), Alberto Manguel (Argentinian, German, Canadian), Tim Parks (English, Italian), and Ilija Trojanow (Bulgarian, German, Kenyan). For each of these writers, cultural heritage is complicated by migration or, as Dagnino prefers, “creative transpatriation,” a process of critical distancing from one’s place and culture of origin (129). Trojanow, for example, is Bulgarian-born, but grew up in Kenya, attending a German-language school; he now lives in Austria and writes in German. Baranay, who writes in English, was born in Italy to Hungarian parents, and has lived for extended periods in India where her novels *Neem Dreams* (2003) and *With the Tiger* (2008) were first published.

This diversity of geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds provides a broad palette for the interviews. Herself a novelist as well as an academic, Dagnino frames the interview section in a quasi-narrative of a (fictional) visit to Istanbul, a city where cultures collide and connect, and where she (imaginatively) meets four of the five writers. The fifth, Parks, is "diffused" throughout (91), a distant commentator on others' views. This playful, post-modern approach to literary scholarship, though not without risks, is here a delight. Dagnino did indeed interview the authors, though not in Istanbul. Their resituated quotes are stitched together with citations from their novels, Dagnino's reflections, and—most daringly—extracts from the author's own diaries, providing glimpses into Dagnino's past and establishing her own transcultural credentials as she comments on locations ranging from Zimbabwe to Australia. These autobiographical insertions will make the book of interest to scholars of auto/biography as well as of the contemporary novel. Overall, this nontraditional approach to literary analysis is effective in conveying both the author's and the interviewees' understandings of transcultural writing, and its deliberate blurring of boundaries is inspired by, and illustrative of, this body of writing.

The second half of the book, which overviews transcultural theory, is scholarly rigorous yet, for this reader, limited in impact because of its "distant reading" and the idealism with which the author views the transpatriation experience. The broad argument is that the concept of the transcultural provides an alternative to individuals striving to disentangle themselves from "the two main master narratives of our present, nationalism and multiculturalism" (102), each of which is predicated upon notions of discrete cultures. Multiculturalism has been under attack since the mid-1990s, and Dagnino cites a number of theorists who see multiculturalism as perpetuating models of identity associated with cultural heritage and difference rather than acknowledging the flux and transformations that mark contemporary societies. Transculturalism, on the other hand, embraces the ambiguities of identities shaped by multiple cultural experiences. The infrequent references to creative works in this section, though consistent with distant reading, result in an increasingly abstract and idealized vision of the "transcultural orientation" (157), posited as intellectually superior to the notions (and problems) of identity commonly attached to experiences of migrancy and exile. The transcultural writer's ability to free herself from the constraints of cultural allegiances and national identities results in her rising above the debilitating experiences of nostalgia or loss of first language (156-57). By the end of this section, Dagnino suggests the emergence of a cohort of "cosmonomads" whose writing may prompt us to "transcend the limitations of our ingrained given cultures, biographies and identities and to look beyond. Even beyond the limits of time and geography..." (197).

Setting such hyperbole to one side, Dagnino's theoretical analysis does put forward a sound set of criteria with which to engage and evaluate transcultural writing. For Dagnino, the transcultural novel will include: multiple foreign settings (as opposed to exotic stereotypes); characters with a transcultural background; a plurality of voices; engagement with foreign words or expressions; and an indeterminacy regarding national or cultural identity (184-87). Her concise discussion of these traits is supported with reference to novels, mostly by her five selected transcultural writers. I wished, reading this, that the rest of the theoretical section had been similarly illustrated (*pace* Moretti).

Categories such as "migrant writer" or "ethnic writer" are undoubtedly restrictive in their analytical capacity and their dependence on a framework of difference. In many cases, the label of "multicultural writer" has a similar corraling effect. *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* offers an alternative lens, applicable to some, though by no means all, writers who have crossed cultures through migration.

Dagnino admits that the transcultural orientation is a condition of the privileged few (130). In bringing together the works of the five writers she selects—an otherwise eclectic grouping spanning continents, cultures, and languages—Dagnino demonstrates that the concept of the transcultural is a significant analytical tool for contemporary readers of world literature.

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DOLOUGHAN, FIONA J. *English as a Literature in Translation*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 179 pp. \$100.00 hardcover; \$89.99 e-book.

Fiona J. Doloughan's new study is an examination of contemporary novels in English through the prism of translation. Taking her departure in the translational turn in Humanities, Steven G. Kellman's influential concept of literary translingualism, and English's role as a lingua franca for non-native speakers worldwide, Doloughan sets out to discover how writers who have found English as opposed to having been born into it (e.g., Eva Hoffman, Ariel Dorfman, Xiaolu Guo) and bilingual writers or writers for whom a non-standard variety of English is the starting point (Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, James Kelman) are changing the expression of literature in English.

Doloughan's interest lies with what she coins as "narratives of translation," that is, "works that thematize, narrativize and/or are structured around, questions of language, cultural identity and what it means to translate oneself or one's culture" (79). The main focus of the study is not primarily the way the examined writers are changing the English literary *language* of today's globalized world; rather, it is the thematic aspects that dominate—that is, how experiences of switching languages and/or moving through cultures are expressed in the chosen works.

It is an optimistic narrative Doloughan is writing. She wants "to suggest that the prototypical notion of language as loss, and translation of self and other as a predominantly painful and traumatic experience, have given way to a greater sense of what is to be gained, both at the individual and societal levels, through access to different languages and cultures" (1). She regards this development as correlating with a more positive understanding of bi- and multilingualism in linguistic research as well as in society.

While literary multilingualism undoubtedly is a vehicle for renewing literary expression, a question already extensively explored in literary scholarship (e.g., Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics* from 2004 and Hana Wirth-Nesher's *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* from 2006, just to mention a couple of works), the narrative of "from loss to gain" is problematic. Firstly, the chronology of the chosen works contradicts it. The most radical argument for linguistic and cultural hybridity as gain, not loss in the study, Anzaldúa's classic *Borderlands/La Frontera* from 1987, is actually the oldest of the works, preceding Hoffman's story of language learning as the loss of another language in *Lost in Translation* (1989) by two years. It also precedes, by over a decade, Ariel Dorfman's memoirs with their eroticization of language ties in terms of bigamy—itsself an excellent illustration of the monolingualist conception of the mother tongue as "a family romance" described by Yasemin Yildiz in *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012).